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Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* and the Cultural Turn

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It is widely recognised that, without Richard Hoggart, there would have been no Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. It isn't always so widely acknowledged that, without *The Uses of Literacy*, there would have been no Cultural Studies. In an early text, I called it one of Cultural Studies' three 'founding texts' (Hall, 1980), and this is an opportunity to expand further on that judgement. The article therefore offers some reflections on the 'moment' of *The Uses of Literacy* – what early Cultural Studies learned from and owed, methodologically, to the book; its connections with wider debates at the time and its formative role in what came to be known as 'the cultural turn'. The latter phrase is the kind of clumsy abstraction Richard Hoggart would not be caught dead using, and there is no point elaborating on it conceptually here. It simply registers an inescapable fact about what I called the growing 'centrality of culture' – the astonishing global expansion and sophistication of the cultural industries; culture's growing significance for all aspects of social and economic life; its re-ordering effects on a variety of critical and intellectual discourses and disciplines; its emergence as a primary and constitutive category of analysis and 'the way in which culture creeps into every nook and crevice of contemporary social life, creating a proliferation of secondary environments, *mediating* everything' (Hall, 1997: 215). This discussion is premised on the assumption that something like a 'cultural turn' did indeed occur across Western societies and their fields of knowledge just before and, in the UK, with gathering momentum, immediately

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after the Second World War; and that, in its own particular way, *The Uses of Literacy* belongs to that moment, is indeed an early example of it as well as playing a seminal role in producing it.

The project of *The Uses of Literacy*, as we know, was many years in gestation. Originally planned as an analysis of the new forms of mass publishing, the radical innovation represented by Part 1 – the attempt to contextualise this in a deeper ‘reading’ of the culture of their readers and audiences – was only subsequently put in place. However, by its publication in 1957, its general intention was unmistakable. It attempted to provide a complex answer to the questions: What were the relations between attitudes in the popular papers and magazines and the working-class readers to whom they were typically addressed? More urgently, how were the newer, more commercially driven forms of mass communications changing older working-class attitudes and values? What, in short, were the ‘uses’ to which this new kind of ‘literacy’ was being put?

Note that, in Part I, the term ‘working-class culture’ seems to apply interchangeably to both the typical attitudes, values and ways of life of working people in the pre-war decades and the forms of publication, entertainment and popular culture that circulated among them. As critics have pointed out, these had very different sources – the latter being produced, not *by* working-class people themselves but by the commercial classes *for the* working classes; and, as Raymond Williams noted in a very early review of *The Uses of Literacy*, ‘the equation of “working class culture” with the mass commercial culture which has increasingly dominated our century’ produces damaging results (Williams, 1957: 30). Nevertheless, Richard Hoggart does assume that a sufficiently close relationship had come to exist between publications and their readers to allow him to represent them as constituting something like ‘An “Older” Order’. Such a mutually reinforcing relationship could no longer be assumed between the working classes and the new forms of mass culture; and this is the nub of the general judgement on cultural change that the book as a whole finally offers. This disjuncture, compounded by the lack in Part II of a sustained attempt ‘to describe the quality of ordinary working-class life, so that the closer analysis of publications might be set into a landscape of solid earth and rock and water’ (Hoggart, 1958: 324), helped to produce the unresolved tension between two very different registers. Hoggart, of course, was fully conscious of this at the time (‘two kinds of writing are to be found in the following pages’) and has frequently subsequently acknowledged it (Hoggart, 1992), but it nevertheless had its determinate effects.

In comparison with the many simplistic, reductive, nostalgic or empiricist accounts on offer, there is a complex and richly nuanced conception of cultural change at work here. The argument is not driven by simple oppositions between old/new, organic/inorganic, elite/mass, good/bad. He was aware of the unsystematic nature of the ‘evidence’, sensitive to the temptations to nostalgia: ‘I am from the working classes . . . this very emotional involvement presents

considerable dangers' (Hoggart, 1958: 17). He does not underplay the impact of growing affluence nor exaggerate the pace and degree of change. The language is carefully modulated in relation to the thesis of cultural decline:

The persistence in so strong a measure of older forms of speech does not indicate a powerful and vibrant continuance of an older tradition, but the tradition is not altogether dead. It is harked back to, leaned upon as a fixed and still largely trustworthy reference in a world now difficult to understand. (Hoggart, 1958: 28)

And '(A)ttitudes alter more slowly than we always realize . . .' (Hoggart, 1958: 13). Nevertheless, the overall drift of the diagnosis cannot be doubted:

My argument is not that there was in England one generation ago, an urban culture still very much 'of the people' and that now there is only a mass urban culture. It is rather that the appeals made by mass publicists are for a number of reasons made more insistently, effectively, and in a more comprehensive and centralised form than they were earlier; that we are moving towards the creation of a mass culture . . . and that the new mass culture is in some important ways less healthy than the often crude culture it is replacing. (Hoggart, 1958: 24)

Diagnosis is a useful term here – the word 'healthy' is telling – since it reminds us of what this conclusion owed to, and how much it was influenced by, the cultural critique offered by the Leavis and *Scrutiny*: the embattled position adopted in F.R. Leavis' own cultural writing; the narrative of decline at the heart of Q.D. Leavis' influential *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932); the strenuous programme of cultural resistance that informed *Scrutiny*'s educational project and manifestos like *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (Leavis, 1930); and the critique of the debased language of advertising offered by Denys Thompson and others. The book also shared much common ground with the pessimistic critique of mass culture offered by conservative critics and writers, many of them American (quotations from Toqueville, Arnold, Benda, Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats, etc. lend authority to the narrative of cultural decline). Mulhern, in his sustained assault on Cultural Studies in all its manifestations, is at pains to show that, however much anyone – apart from Raymond Williams – struggled to break free from what he calls this metacultural discourse of 'Kulturkritik', they were doomed to repeat it: while acknowledging that Hoggart made serious efforts to counter this tendency, Mulhern insists that his 'discursive affiliation' with this tradition remains intact (Mulhern, 2000).

However, as Mulhern himself acknowledges, 'Genealogy is not destiny' (Mulhern, 2000:174). Leaving aside the assumption that governs Mulhern's discourse – namely, that an alternative cultural theory was already available, in a

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complex Marxism already wise to its own tendency to reductionism – what seems more interesting is to note the ways *The Uses of Literacy*, in trying to break from this master-discourse of cultural decline, was precisely ‘a text of the break’ (as Mulhern recognises Raymond Williams’ *The Long Revolution* also was): and for that very reason opened possibilities that Cultural Studies and ‘the cultural turn’ were subsequently to build on.

The dominant *Scrutiny* narrative was constructed on the back of an unspoken assumption about the limited cultural resources and restricted moral universe of working-class readers and audiences. Only *Scrutiny*’s ‘saving remnant’, whose sensibilities had been refined by a long cohabitation with the authority that the literary tradition offered, and whose moral backbone had been stiffened by strenuous and sustained critical engagement with lit.crit. (‘This is so, is it not?’), offered a site of resistance to the mass appeals and blandishments of the new, debased culture. Hoggart’s account is aware of the limitations of that starting-point. ‘I am inclined to think that books on popular culture often lose some of their force by not making sufficiently clear what is meant by “the people”, by inadequately relating their examination of particular aspects of “the people’s” life to the wider life they live, and to the attitudes they bring to their entertainments’. Even George Orwell, whose studies on popular culture were in some ways paradigmatic, ‘never quite lost the habit of seeing the working class through the cosy fug of an Edwardian music hall’ (Hoggart, 1958: 9, 15).

On the contrary, the implied argument here runs, working-class audiences are not empty vessels, on which the middle classes and the mass media can project, *tabula rasa*, whatever they want. They are not simply the products of ‘false consciousness’ or ‘cultural dopes’ (Hall, 1981). They have a ‘culture’ of their own which, though it may lack the authority afforded by the literary tradition, and is certainly not unified, is in its own way just as dense, complex and richly articulated, morally, as that of the educated classes. It follows that the effects of cultural products cannot be ‘read off’ or inferred from the contents of what is produced for them to consume because, to have ‘effects’ of any depth, they must enter into and be in active negotiation with an already fully elaborated cultural world. Reading, in this sense, is always a cultural practice. If the ‘older’ popular culture, however commercially organised and crude in its appeals, seemed less of an ‘assault from the outside’, this was not because it was an authentic product of that culture, but because it was closer to – mirrored more faithfully or, better, worked more ‘authentically’ along the groove of – the habits, attitudes and unspoken assumptions of its working-class audience, and had more fully ‘indigenised’ itself, by long cohabitation, as it were, within the complex history of the formations of an urban-industrial corporate class. If the new forms of mass culture were effecting change, it could only be because they too addressed themselves to the lived textures and complex attitudes of the culture in which they sought to embed themselves, working along its grooves, while at the same time inflecting and disconnecting them, dislodging them from within and

attaching them to new modes of feeling, habits and judgements – ‘unbending the springs of action’.

It is pertinent to ask, then, not only how much it owed to and derived from the discourse of ‘Kulturkritik’ but how far and in what significant ways did it *break with* that discourse? What were the methodological and conceptual innovations implicit in its practice of writing and thinking on which new directions could be built? One can list them without elaboration. A very different conception of ‘culture’ is at work here from that which animates the tradition of Kulturkritik. By ‘culture’, Hoggart meant how working-class people spoke and thought, what language and common assumptions about life they shared, in speech and action, what social attitudes informed their daily practice, what moral categories they deployed, even if only aphoristically, to make judgements about their own behaviour and that of others – including, of course, how they brought all this to bear on what they read, saw and sang. This view of culture as the practices of ‘making sense’ was very far removed indeed from ‘culture’ as the ideal court of judgement, whose touchstone was ‘the best that has been thought and said’, which animated the tradition from Arnold to Eliot and Leavis. The aim to make culture in the former sense a central and necessary part of the object of study, however fitfully achieved, was as defining a break as Williams’ third definition in *The Long Revolution* – culture as ‘ways of life’ – and, moreover, despite significant differences, a break *moving in a parallel direction*. This was a formative moment for Cultural Studies.

Second, there was the insistence that ‘ways of life’ had to be studied in and for themselves, as a necessary contextualising of any attempt to understand cultural change, and not inferred from textual analysis alone. We may call this the social imperative at the heart of Hoggart’s method; and from such origins the *interdisciplinary* character of Cultural Studies (which has since been somewhat obscured by the Humanities deluge) derived. Third, there was the emphasis on culture as primarily a matter of *meaning*: not meanings as free-floating ideas or as ideals embodied in texts but as part of lived experience, shaping social practice: analysis as ‘the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life’ (Williams, 1965: 57). Fourth, there was the methodological innovation evidenced in Hoggart’s adaptation of the literary-critical method of ‘close reading’ to the sociological task of interpreting the lived meanings of a culture. One says ‘sociological’, but clearly something more innovative than standard empirical sociological methods was required – nothing less than a kind of ‘social hermeneutics’ is implied in these interpretive procedures: ‘we have to try to see beyond the habits to what the habits stand for, to see through the statements to what the statements really mean (which may be the opposite of the statements themselves) to detect the differing pressures of emotion behind idiomatic phrases and ritualistic observances’ (Hoggart, 1958: 17). Of course, ‘reading the culture from inside’ was possible for Hoggart as a member of the working class, with rich childhood memories and experiences to draw

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on. Students trying to follow the book's methodological imperatives and staff attempting to teach students how to apply them to a piece of work – things that the establishment of 'a centre' required – were not so fortunate and required more stringent protocols. In its earliest days, the Centre had two working groups: in one, the reading ranged far and wide over 'other disciplines'; in the second, Richard Hoggart took students through a close reading of such texts as Blake's *Tiger, Tiger*, the opening of *Sons and Lovers*, Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*, Sylvia Plath's *Daddy* 'reading for tone' – i.e. for implied attitudes to the audience. But these were early days . . .

Much that followed in the evolution of Cultural Studies in the 1970s and 1980s were developments of the mixed and incomplete openings offered by *The Uses of Literacy* as a 'text of the break': resisting its cultural narrative while deepening the epistemological breaks that its methodology exemplified. Many of these leads were not conceptually developed, even in the 'Schools of English and Contemporary Society' lecture, which mapped out the Centre's initial programme (Hoggart, 1970). When the complaint about 'the turn to theory' in Cultural Studies is made, it is difficult to see where else the Centre could have begun other than by deepening these breaks by way of sustained conceptual interrogation and methodological self-reflection – as it were, 'working on the work'.

Thus, to take some examples: the move to Cultural Studies as a fully interdisciplinary enterprise and the break with 'the literary' as its governing discourse was implicit in the injunction to study the society and the culture as 'lived' equally with its texts, and was extensively taken up in various ways in the work of the Centre in the 1970s: although nothing took us quite as far as Williams' 'the theory of culture as a study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life' (Williams, 1965: 63) or, as we tried to translate that in the 1970s, the study of 'the cultural' and its relation to other practices in a social formation. The trace of the 'literary' remained in Hoggart's close and sensitive attention to language and his insistence (in his inaugural lecture) that popular and mass cultural texts must be understood as functioning 'as art – even as *bad art*': a comment which, while not quite bypassing the traditional high/low good/bad categories of the mass culture debate, reinforced attention to language as a cultural model and the symbolic modality in which culture operates. This connects with the persistent return, subsequently, via the dialogue with semiotics, post-structuralism and theories of discourse, to the necessary 'delay through the symbolic' without which all cultural studies threatens to become reductionist (Hall, 2006). The notion that audiences actively bring something to, rather than simply being spoken by, texts, and that 'reading' is an active exchange, was taken up in the critique of the dominant 'effects' tradition in mass communications research that organised much of the Centre's early research projects, certainly underpins my own work on the 'encoding/decoding model' (Hall, 1980) and was revived in the influence of Bakhtin's idea of the dialogic and the 'active audience', reader-response and even the elements of overkill in the so-called 'populist' emphases

of later work on audiences. The legacy of culture as the interpretive study of meanings embedded in 'ways of life' is to be found in the many studies that deployed ethnographic, participant observation and other anthropological techniques of what Geertz called 'thick description', and beyond that, to the language of 'signifying practices'. The view that textual materials have real social effectivity only when they 'work along the groove' of existing attitudes and inflect them in new directions contains a model of how social ideologies really achieve their effects much in advance of existing models of influence, ideological domination and false consciousness; anticipating much that was to follow in theories of multi-accentuality and transcoding, and the impact on Cultural Studies of the more fully developed Gramscian model of 'hegemony' and cultural power as dependent on 'the wining of consent': a very different conception of the popular (see Hall, 1981). And so on . . .

The publication of *The Uses of Literacy* had an enormous impact: in part for the intrinsic interest, quality and originality of its argument, in part because of its bearing on wider discussions about the pace and direction of post-war social change. The growing commercialisation of mass culture, the birth of television, youth culture and the rise of mass consumption were part and parcel of what came to be known as 'the affluent debate'. The impact of these forces on the working class had particular resonance for the Labour Party, its electoral prospects and what Anthony Crosland, in his prophetic book, called *The Future of Socialism*. Was the class basis of Labour's support being eroded by socio-cultural change? True, culture had played a somewhat residual role in Labour thinking. The roots of 'Labourism' in the dense, defensive, subaltern, corporate structures of working-class culture had not been the subject of much serious reflection until exposed by the newer class attitudes and values emerging with the onset of commercialisation. Hoggart's book played directly into these anxieties. These fuelled the Labour Party's revisionist debates of the late 1950s, underpinned Mark Abrams' *Must Labour Lose?*, with its negative assessment of Labour's prospects in the wake of social change among its heartland class supporters, and was summed up in Gaitskell's famous 1959 Labour Party Conference speech where he vividly inquired whether Labour as a political force could survive the coming of 'the car, the telly, the washing machine and the fridge'. Tony Blair's 'New Labour' and the aspirational culture has long historical antecedents . . .

Richard Hoggart did not directly address these questions and working-class politics did not figure largely in the book. As is well known, Hoggart chose to concentrate on the majority to whom the appeals of the mass publicists were primarily addressed and deliberately downplayed the role of what he called 'the purposive, the political, the pious and the self-improving minorities' (Hoggart, 1958: 22): contrary to, say, Raymond Williams, who regarded politics as part of the 'high working class tradition' and the building of political institutions as among their most outstanding cultural achievements ('an extension of primary values into the social fields' (Williams, 1957: 31). Yet the opening paragraphs

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show that Hoggart's argument took its bearings from the broader debate about post-war affluence and what came to be known as working-class 'embourgeoisement':

It is often said that there are no working-classes in England now, that a 'bloodless revolution' has taken place which has so reduced social differences that already most of us inhabit an almost flat plain, the plain of the lower middle- to middle-classes . . . We are likely to be struck by the extent to which working-class people have improved their lot, acquired more power and more possessions . . . no longer feel themselves members of 'the lower orders' . . . (Hoggart, 1958: 14)

The conclusion is, of course, measured and complex, but unmistakable in its thrust: 'We may now see that in at least one sense we are indeed becoming classless . . . We are becoming culturally classless' (Hoggart, 1958: 142). This became a focus of debate in early New Left circles, although what I called 'a sense of classlessness' had acquired a wider and more critical meaning (see Hall (1959) and the shocked responses by Samuel (1959) and Thompson (1959)).

The broader connections between Cultural Studies and the 'first' New Left have been widely noted (Hall, 1989). In particular, the book also had a major impact on the milieu which I inhabited in the period of its publication – principally because, for fortuitous reasons, these concerns – the changing nature of contemporary capitalism, the politics of post-war social change and the constitutive nature of culture – together formed critical contested ground in the heady debates of the time. A nascent 'new left' had emerged in Oxford as a distinct, informal student formation in the mid-1950s. Its subsequent coalescence with others into a movement was triggered by the events of 1956 – the invasion of the Suez Canal by Britain, France and Israel and the brutal Soviet response to the Hungarian Revolution and their effects in loosening the grip of the Cold War on political debate (Hall, 1989).

The publication of *The Uses of Literacy* had a huge impact in these circles. There was a vigorous discussion in progress, among students from a variety of left tendencies in Oxford, about the nature of post-war capitalism, the character of the historic compromise represented by the welfare state, the changing nature of class, the impact of the Cold War, the revival of imperialism, the value of Marxism and the prospects for the left in the new historic conditions. Many were also literary critics and familiar with the Leavis/*Scrutiny* argument about mass culture, although the majority had largely rejected both its assumptions about cultural decline and the elitist and the conservative character of its programme of cultural resistance. Some people were already in conversation with Raymond Williams and had read early chapters of *Culture and Society* in draft form. In this milieu, culture came to be seen not as an absolute value but as a constitutive dimension of all social practices and thus an active force in politics and social change: offering what (in the issue of the Labour Club journal, *Clarion*, which I

edited (1957) and which was dominated by responses to *The Uses of Literacy*) I called 'quite different kinds of evidence' (Hall, 1957: 3). All this provided fertile ground for the reception of Hoggart's book, stimulating fierce debate. The second issue of *Universities and Left Review* (1957), one of the two founding New Left journals that followed, contained a major symposium on *The Uses of Literacy*, including Raymond Williams' influential review. Hoggart and Williams both contributed essays to subsequent issues and Williams became a leading figure in the New Left.

This debate has been read by its critics as evidence of culture subsuming politics (Mulhern, 2000); but this seems a rather perverse finding. It was part of the effort – then no doubt still at a primitive stage – to expand the definition of culture and politics, which came to be distinctive of both the New Left and Cultural Studies: to see culture as one of the constitutive grounds of *all* social practices – including politics – in so far as they are 'signifying' (i.e. as they have 'relevance for meaning', as Max Weber once put it). Unless social groups and classes are always already inscribed in political place by 'the economic in the last instance' and 'wear their political number plates on their backs', as Poulantzas once graphically put it, how could the recruitment of social forces to political positions and programmes and their mobilisation in the contest over power *not* be a political issue? And how could that process occur without 'working', in part, on the constitutive ground of the meanings by which people make sense of their lives? This, Mulhern argues, makes 'culture' everything – too excessive, without fixed composition or tendency . . . a heterogeneous mass of possibilities'. Not everything: but *a dimension* of all signifying practices (which of course also have material conditions of existence); and not without 'tendencies', but never finally determined, and thus always open to more than one possibility – and so always with a degree of contingency. The proposition that the 'constitutive function' of politics is to 'determine the order of social relations as a whole' (Mulhern, 2000: 173) only muddies the water.

Richard Hoggart used the term 'Americanisation' to connote the wider set of changes that framed his argument. When the New Left came to debate these issues more directly, the US also provided a privileged point of reference – for very good reasons. The commercialisation of culture, the new dynamic forms of mass culture – television, pop music, advertising, youth culture – the incorporation of the masses more fully into the market and the phenomenon of mass consumerism were all to be found there, emerging, in the post-war period, in their strongest contemporary forms. This marked the shift in the index of 'leading instance' of advanced industrial capitalist society from Britain to the US. Already, in the 1950s, this looked like setting free explosive new cultural forces, although it is only clear retrospectively how much the book belonged to the opening of a new *conjuncture*.

We cannot discuss this in detail here but we can see the broad contours of this shift much more clearly in retrospect. There was a post-war boom, with

rising living standards. The long-term redistributive shift was much more limited than the prophets estimated (though Wallerstein is right to argue that it was quite enough to scare capital out of its wits and provoked the great counter-surge of globalisation, market forces, the neo-liberal revolution and the 'new world order'). In fact, affluence did not represent 'classlessness' as such: rather, it marked the early stages of that long transition (not yet completed) from the older, tiered, socially embedded class structures and Protestant Ethic typical of Western European bourgeois societies to the more truncated, 'post-industrial' class structures, based on corporate capital, money, celebrity lifestyle, hedonism and consumption. Underlying this was the prolonged shift from nineteenth-century entrepreneurial capitalism, via the apotheosis of the 'high noon' of imperialism, the First World War, the failure of the proletarian 'moment' and the inter-war Depression, to the great surge of power represented by the concentrations of corporate capitalism, the managerial revolution and Fordist economies of scale of the late twentieth century. Mass society, mass culture, mass consumerism and mass markets were integral aspects of this historic shift: precisely how to understand their real interdependencies remains one of Cultural Studies' unfulfilled tasks – probably lost forever in the hyper-theoretical and post-political climate that came to prevail. Of course, in the immediate decades after *The Uses of Literacy*, the shape of things was to be dominated by the historic compromise of the welfare state and the social-democratic consensus. But by the end of the 1970s – and massively reorganised on a global scale – the forces we were trying to understand began to return to the stage with unstoppable force, and did, indeed, change the world.

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